

June Parade's Honoree: 'A Bad Guy.' 'Why Not?'

The New York Times

May 30, 2017 Tuesday

Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 0; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 17

Length: 1081 words

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Body

Two weeks before the 60th annual Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City, Andrés Otero was his own grand marshal of the Loisaída Festival, a neighborhood celebration on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Decked head to toe in the colors of the Puerto Rican flag on Sunday, he drove down the middle of Avenue C in a red scooter festooned with stickers of conga drums and roosters.

As salsa music played and grills smoked at the popular street fair, Mr. Otero, 75, was as buoyant as the rest of the crowd. But his mood darkened when he was asked about Oscar López Rivera, a Puerto Rican nationalist militant recently released from federal prison after 35 years, who will be honored at the parade on June 11.

Mr. López Rivera, 74, was a member of a terrorist organization fighting for Puerto Rican independence that carried out 120 bombings in the 1970s and 1980s, including two in New York that killed five people. He was never charged with murder, but was convicted of seditious conspiracy for plotting to overthrow the government. President Barack Obama commuted his sentence.

"I don't believe any person who served time in jail for crimes committed against the United States should be in the parade," said Mr. Otero, who has lived on the Lower East Side since moving from San Juan, P.R., in 1962. "He didn't do nothing for us. How do you go to the United States Army and come back and be against the United States? You got two faces."

This is a particularly fraught time for Puerto Rico. The island's finances are a shambles, and it recently declared a form of bankruptcy. Its university students are on strike, and on the same day as the New York parade, residents will vote yet again in a nonbinding referendum on whether the island should become the 51st state.

After the recent suicide bombing in Manchester, England, and in a city still scarred by terrorism, the parade's choice to honor Mr. López Rivera as a National Freedom Hero has led several corporate sponsors to withdraw, including Goya Foods, Coca-Cola, the Yankees and Univision.

New York City's police chief and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo have also said they will not participate, but Mayor Bill de Blasio and many of the city's top Puerto Rican politicians, including the City Council speaker, Melissa Mark-Viverito, and Ruben Diaz Jr., the Bronx borough president, have remained steadfast in their support.

New Yorkers of Puerto Rican heritage seem divided by disgust, approval or indifference, and not necessarily along generational or educational lines. Many interviewed in recent days said they did not know much about Mr. López Rivera beyond what they had seen on television.

One thing was abundantly clear: The pride of Puerto Rico may have one flag, but many faces.

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"Wait a couple of years until it dies down, because he takes away from everything and the festivities," Ana Morales, 65, said in the lobby of the Casabe Houses, an apartment complex in East Harlem.

Smokey Escobar, 62, felt differently. "Why not? He earned it, in his way," he said, standing in an East Harlem community garden.

He added: "We are all Puerto Rican -- why are we always making ourselves look bad?"

Mr. Escobar and his friends were barbecuing in the garden with spices from Goya, a company founded by Spanish immigrants, whose withdrawal created a spinoff debate among Puerto Ricans.

Ricardo Gabriel, 36, a doctoral candidate writing about Puerto Rican activists at the City University of New York, saw a silver lining. "The parade has been dominated by corporate sponsors, and I felt like it wasn't authentic anymore," he said. "But now, with Goya and others pulling out, I think this is a step in the right direction."

This year is also the 100th anniversary of the granting of United States citizenship to Puerto Ricans, a reminder of the complicated relationship between the commonwealth and the mainland.

"Puerto Rico has always traditionally been a colony of the United States," said David Gonzalez, 62, who grew up in East Harlem and now lives on the Upper West Side.

"Puerto Ricans tried politically to gain their means," he said. "And there were those who felt that in order to draw their attention, you had to create certain acts. Oscar was never convicted of murder or any violence of that nature."

Kiya Vega-Hutchens, 26, a climate justice organizer for Uprose, a Puerto Rican-founded organization in Brooklyn, said Mr. López Rivera's marching in the parade was timely. "I, for one, am excited that we're talking about that he's being honored, because it's going to be pushing the conversation on Puerto Rico's connection to the United States," she said.

Mr. López Rivera, after serving in Vietnam and working as a community organizer in Chicago, became a member of the Armed Forces of National Liberation, known by its initials in Spanish, F.A.L.N. In 1975, the group claimed responsibility for the bombing of Fraunces Tavern in Manhattan, which killed four people and injured more than 60. A 1977 bombing of the Mobil Oil Corporation in Midtown Manhattan killed one person.

"He's a bandit, a bad guy," said Edwin Rodriguez, 70, in South Williamsburg.

Elizabeth Colon, 28, also opposed Mr. López Rivera's recognition.

"We don't follow violence," she said at the Loisaida Festival. "We built this neighborhood, and we gave Puerto Ricans the name they have today, and I don't believe he's a good representation of all the lovely young women and men that strive to make this community better and not blow it up."

Other Puerto Ricans were less animated about the debate.

"I don't really understand it, and maybe I should, but I've been born and raised here, so those politics don't affect me too much," said Jacinto de Jesus, 49, who owns a store in South Williamsburg.

"I don't know that it's worth all the years of this Puerto Rican Day parade going on for just one guy that has everybody so divided," Mr. de Jesus added.

For many, the celebration of Puerto Rico is not centered on the Fifth Avenue route in Manhattan, but on their own block, in their own barrio. There, they can express their island pride without politics or crowds. Ana Seda, 54, never goes to the parade in Manhattan, since she throws her own party from the balcony on South Third Street in South Williamsburg.

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"Every year I put my flags on the fire escape, and everybody's screaming. I've got music, I make food. Wepa, Boricua!" Ms. Seda said, cheering the name for Puerto Ricans. "No. 1 Boricua!"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/29/nyregion/puerto-rican-day-parade-honoree-a-bad-guy-why-not.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: Ana Seda, above, of South Williamsburg, Brooklyn, hosts a party rather than attend the Puerto Rican Day Parade in Manhattan. Andrés Otero, above left, was the grand marshal at the Loisaida Festival in Manhattan on Sunday. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDU BAYER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Osvaldo Budet hung a banner Friday in support of Oscar López Rivera, the Puerto Rican Day Parade's National Freedom Hero, at El Puente community center in Brooklyn. (PHOTOGRAPH BY EDU BAYER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: PARADES & MARCHES (91%); CORRECTIONS (90%); CRIME, LAW ENFORCEMENT & CORRECTIONS (90%); FESTIVALS (90%); NEGATIVE NEWS (90%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (90%); TRENDS & EVENTS (90%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); MURDER (89%); TERRORISM (89%); TERRORISM & COUNTERTERRORISM (89%); CITIES (78%); POLICE FORCES (78%); PUERTO RICO STATEHOOD (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); BOMBINGS (74%); CONSPIRACY (74%); JAIL SENTENCING (74%); SENTENCING (74%); TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS (74%); WAR & CONFLICT (74%); COUPS (73%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (73%); NEGATIVE MISC NEWS (72%); POLITICS (72%); US PRESIDENTS (72%); FOLK & WORLD MUSIC (71%); MAYORS (71%); COMMUTATION OF SENTENCE (69%); PRISONS (69%); SEPARATISM & SECESSION (68%); SUICIDE BOMBINGS (68%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (67%); US ARMY (66%); REFERENDUMS (62%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (62%); ARMIES (53%)

Company: COCA-COLA CO (52%)

Organization: US DEPARTMENT OF ARMY (54%)

Ticker: KO (NYSE) (52%)

Industry: NAICS312111 SOFT DRINK MANUFACTURING (52%); SIC2086 BOTTLED & CANNED SOFT DRINKS & CARBONATED WATER (52%); FESTIVALS (90%); SPONSORSHIP (73%); US ARMY (66%); ARMIES (53%)

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Person: BILL DE BLASIO (79%); ANDREW CUOMO (58%); BARACK OBAMA (51%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (95%); SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO (79%); MANCHESTER, ENGLAND (67%); NEW YORK, USA (94%); PUERTO RICO (94%); UNITED STATES (93%); ENGLAND (75%)

Load-Date: May 30, 2017

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